Book Review

Mark Lane's questioning pen turns

by GROVER SALES

Code Name 'Zorro': The Murder of Martin Luther King Jr. by Mark Lane and Dick Gregory (

The political assassinations of the '60s continue to haunt America. A cynical public suspects itself ruled by a secret government given to cabal, intrigue and murder as policies of state. Last December, the Gallup Poll found only 11% believed Oswald was the lone assassin of President Kennedy, and only 18% believed James Earl Ray the lone assassin of Martin Luther King. Such notions were once written off as the paranoia of such "conspiracy cranks" as attorney Mark Lane, whose 1966 "Rush to Judgment" fired the opening salvo against the Warren Commission.

Ten years later the chairman of the House Select Committee on Assassinations announced, "There are 380 unanswered questions in the Kennedy matter and 600 in the King matter."

Mark Lane and Dick Gregory's "Code Name 'Zorro'" (the FBI's designation for Dr. King) is an evangelical cry to rethink and reopen the King murder that Lane exhaustively researched for nine years with fanatical zeal. His abrasive and accusatory style is leavened by the salty gallows wit of comic-turned-activist Gregory, whose peripheral role is limited to an impassioned remembrance of King and the turbulent civil rights struggle that led to his murder in Memphis on April 4, 1968.

Lane raises dozens of questions:

1—Was Ray, who before and after his trial declared himself the victim of a "set-up" by a man he called Raoul, coerced by Soviet-type prison treatment into pleading guilty in a ploy by the FBI, CIA, the Memphis police and judiciary and Ray's own attorney to keep the facts about King's murder from surfacing in court?

2—Ray claims Raoul had long provided him with funds, and instructed him to purchase the murder rifle. If not, how and why did Ray, after his Missouri jailbreak, travel by car, with no visible means of support, from Los Angeles to New Orleans and from Canada to Mexico?

3—Why did the Memphis police chief reduce King's security detail from 10 men to two, Lane asks, less than two hours before the murder?

4—Why was Floyd Newsum, a black fireman and King supporter, transferred under extraordinary circumstances, according to Lane, from his firehouse security "command post" overlooking King's motel room on the morning of the murder?

5—After the Memphis police concluded King had been fired upon from a rooming-house window across from his motel balcony, why did an unpublished photo show the sniper's view totally obscured

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to King murder

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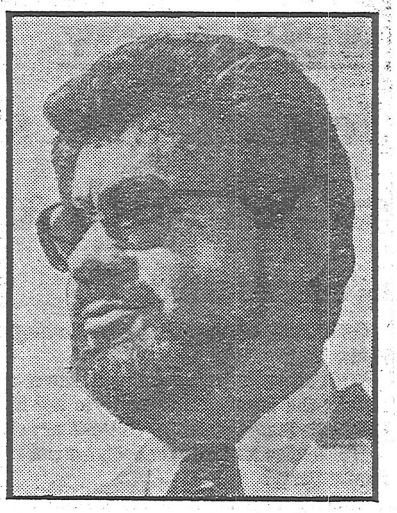
by trees that were later ordered cut down, Lane says, by the mayor of Memphis?

6—Why did the mayor of Memphis order the police to burn all 180 boxes of their files covering domestic intelligence on the King murder, according to the book, upon learning in September, 1976, that the House had established a committee to investigate the King and Kennedy assassinations?

7—Why did the FBI reportedly wait a full 25 minutes after being notified of King's murder before assigning agents to close off the area to prevent the assassin's escape?

8—Why did the only eyewitness of the fleeing murder suspect describe a man who bore no resemblance to Ray, and why did Memphis authorities confine her to a mental institution, Lane says, with no previous history of mental illness, where she remains to this day?

Lane's conclusions promise to unloose a storm of denial and perhaps litigation. Aside from his claim that "Ray has been poorly treated, his basic rights denied and the essential case against him was so flawed that it would have been difficult for a jury to convict him," Lane infers the assassination was a conspiracy/coverup orchestrated by J. Edgar Hoover in cahoots with the CIA, Department of Justice and the police and judicial powers of strife-ridden Memphis who shared Hoover's "paranoid hatred of FBI critics, blacks and movements for change." To this "grand conspiracy" is added Ray's trial lawyer Percy Foreman, who Lane pictures as a bumbling charlatan inducing Ray to plead guilty as a conscious part of the coverup. He's even less generous with rival authors who tried to prove Ray the lone assassin: William Bradford Huie ("He Slew the Dreamer") and George McMillan ("The Making of an Assassin"), building a case that neither of his rivals



Mark Lane

did their homework. But while Lane devotes separate chapters to the demolition of Huie and McMillan, he all but ignores those who long labored to unravel the King mystery—Bernard Fensterwald Jr., who became Ray's counsel, and Harold Weisberg, whose 1971 "Frame-Up" must have proved a help to Lane, while Gerold Frank's "An American Death" gets no mention at all. That would suggest Lane may be prone to the "I got there first" syndrome that afflicts far too many research specialists in every field. His chapters bristle with the assumption the assassinations are Lane's private, roped-off territory, and all intruders are, at best, dupes, hustlers and incompetents, at worst, government hirelings committed to perpetuate the lone assassin fantasy.

These shrill and vindictive charges weaken Lane's otherwise convincing case and do much to distract even the most sympathetic reader from the urgent doubts he casts on the official version of King's murder.

Sales is a film, drama and book critic in the San Francisco area and the author of "John Maher of Delancey Street."